

Get personal to improve heart health

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Scare tactics may not be necessary when trying to get patients at risk of heart disease to change their diet or behaviour, a new study has found. Instead, doctors and nurses should be aware of the stage of life their patients are at, and offer them very specific and targeted advice.

"The goal is to produce interventions which are sensitive to the lives and social position of those who find themselves at 'high risk' of coronary heart disease (CHD) in later-middle age, and which inspire change rather than inhibit it," say researchers, from Egenis, the ESRC Centre for Genomics in Society at the University of Exeter.

High-risk patients will often downgrade their risk in their own minds, yet could still be receptive to the behavioural change which is the purpose of CHD screening, explained Dr Hannah Farrimond, who studied the reaction of patients to being told they were at high risk. Boosting patients' sense of vulnerability does not help, and may even hinder, their efforts to change, the study found.

"Once patients have got over the shock of being at high risk of heart disease, they then tend to underplay their risk," says Dr Farrimond.

"They compare themselves favourably with, say, others of the same age. In the past, researchers have thought we need to scare people into feeling at risk to make them change. This study suggests that even those who downplayed their risk still made changes, such as taking statins or exercising more. In other words, we don't need to scare people to get results. Clinical staff need to find other ways of encouraging patients to make the necessary lifestyle changes, such as offering personalised

advice."

The findings of Dr Farrimond's paper 'Making sense of being at 'high risk' of coronary heart disease', are published in the current issue of the journal *Psychology and Health*.

Current NHS policy advocates screening in primary care to identify 'high risk' individuals for coronary heart disease (CHD), particularly targeting those with family histories of the disease, through schemes such as the new, free 'health MOT' campaign. Until now, there has been little research looking at how people respond to such heart disease screening, particularly in relation to their age and stage of life. This study investigated the impact of the screening on the patients involved by interviewing 38 of them immediately after their intervention, looking particularly at how the age and stage of life of the participants affected their reactions.

More information: 'Making sense of being at 'high risk' of heart disease' is published in the journal *Psychology and Health*. The article is currently available online at:

www.informaworld.com/DOI=10.1080/08870440802499382

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